

Parent-Educator Connection History

The planning and initial design of what became the Parent-Educator Connection grew out of an initial meeting held in November, 1984 in Cedar Rapids. The Iowa Department of Public Instruction (DPI), Bureau of Special Education (BSE) pulled together a group of about 40 people, parents and educators. Over the course of two days, they listened to and discussed presentations from four different types of programs from around the country that worked in the area of parent/educator training regarding P.L. 94-142, the Education of the Handicapped Act. After hearing the “what, where, when, why, and how” of the various programs, time was spent identifying key characteristics of what a program to serve families and educators in Iowa might look like. The key elements were captured on public minutes, members to serve on a task force were identified and the next few months were spent working to design a program to be implemented in Iowa.

The key elements identified by the group in 1984 were:

- the structure needed to be through the AEA system,
- the purpose needed to be built on the partnership between parents and educator in educating children with disabilities.
- money needed to be provided by the state department to implement the program
- staff for the program needed to reflect the partnership.

To reflect the partnership, it was decided that the program needed to be co-directed by a parent of a child with disabilities and a special educator from the AEA.

By the spring of 1985 all the organizational pieces were in place for AEAs to submit competitive grant proposals to the Iowa DPI for implementation of programming in the fall. Thirteen of the fifteen AEAs submitted grant proposals the first year. Activities for the group of identified partners focused on the skills and knowledge needed to be able to work with families and educators in the areas of special education rules and regulations, communication, presentation, organization, product development and acquisition of materials and information to disseminate back home in each AEA. Remember, this was before the advent of computers and the Internet!

At that time, the state PEC program had a leader, an educator, who was staffed at the Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center at Drake University. Directing the program from the office there kept the program in a more neutral position, as well as offering the program the expertise and technical assistance from a national network of centers. The activities from the state office included:

- assistance with annual submission of grants by the AEA programs to the DPI,
- assistance in writing the final reports for the AEA programs,
- coordinator meetings three times a year,
- technical assistance and on-site visits to AEA programs upon request,
- the writing and mass mailing of six newsletters each year,
- planning and implementing an annual statewide conference for parents and educators
- location of and dissemination of materials across the PEC programs
- development of materials to be used in the AEA PEC programs

The activities in the AEAs were:

- Product development for parents and educators

- Training opportunities
- Newsletter writing and dissemination
- One-on-one support for parents and educators
- Sharing the activities know how with the PEC programs across the state
- Building libraries for reference materials, books and tapes
- Building relationships with other professionals within the AEA and region
- Writing grant proposals and final reports

Over the following two years, each of the remaining AEAs wrote their first grant proposals for the PEC program, so by 1987, all AEAs in Iowa had a Parent-Educator Connection Program.

Two “ah-ha’s” regarding the program occurred about the same time—one about the AEA programs and one about the state program. The realization about the state program was there wasn’t a partnership demonstrated at the level, so the addition of a parent coordinator changed the administration of the state work. On the AEA level, it was demonstrated that competitive grant writing was not a democratic way to make decisions about a statewide program, so a formula for dollar distribution was developed and implemented. The formula was calculated on a base figure (to maintain an office in each AEA) and additional funds were generated by the child count in each respective AEA. For some AEAs, that meant they were getting more money than previously, and for other AEAs, it meant that they were getting funds over the amount the formula has designated. It took several years to bring everyone into alignment with the formula funding.

As more knowledge was acquired about “systems development” the PEC participated in a process to develop a mission and beliefs for the program to focus the purpose and direction of the work across the state. For a short period of time, there were a few state-wide common goals for the program, from which each AEA determined the needed activities to reach the goal. During this period, in a response to the paper work involved with the PEC program a couple of changes were made. It was decided that evidence of final report data (agendas, training opportunities, products, newsletter, steering committee minutes, communications and so forth) no longer needed to be included with the final reports, so the final reports were no longer as difficult and bulky to together. Over time, it was decided grant writing and updates, it was decided with and update, the only items from the original grant that needed to be turned in was the changes. A change constituted an addition, deletion, or change, to either a goal or activity. Other “system” changes in these intervening years included the renaming of the DPI to the Department of Education (DE), and a few years later the name shift to the Bureau of Special Education (BSE) to the Bureau of Children, Families and Community Services (CFCS).

In 2002, the state Parent-Educator Connection office moved from Drake University to the Bureau of Children, Family and Community Services. At the same time there was an increased system effort to keep up with the rapid changes in education being experienced in the state- specifically the changes in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act- No Child Left Behind and the implications for parent involvement inherent in that legislation. Given the quickly altering educational landscape and the fact the PEC has been in existence for nearly twenty years, there is a desire and need to continually take a fresh look to the future and the work of the PEC. Developing a system that can respond to the needs and supports for children with disabilities and their families within an age of quickly accessed information is interesting work. You may help in the process by letting PEC staff in your area and at the state know what you are thinking....